Who is My Neighbour?: Tim Winton's 'Aquifer' and the Ghosts of Cloudstreet

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When the Lamb family arrive at their new home in Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet* (1991), Quick Lamb surveys the building's façade and remarks, 'Looks flamin haunted' (48). Quick's words turn out to be prophetic, for the Cloudstreet house does, indeed, contain the restless souls of two ghosts. The ghosts are a legacy of the days when the house was used as a home for young Indigenous women, an outwardly benevolent function that in reality reflects the prejudices of colonial Australia. Michael R. Griffiths examines the significance of this sense of being haunted that pervades the novel, arguing that the house represents 'a spectral logic of ownership and habitation synecdochic of settler-colonial nationhood' in which 'the ghosts that haunt Cloudstreet figure a history of Indigenous prior occupation, as well as colonial dispossession and its form of assimilation' (79). Griffiths builds on similar observations by a number of other critics on this theme in *Cloudstreet*, most obviously David Crouch, who compares *Cloudstreet* to Hume Nisbet's 'The Haunted Station' (1894) and observes that such stories 'rehearse crucial anxieties within the Australian psyche, to tap a sense of "haunted country" ' where 'the presence of ghosts can be read as traces of historical traumas, fears which are often exposed in expressions of apprehensive (un)settlement' (94). The haunting of the Cloudstreet house, these critics argue, reflects a larger concern in Australian literature with the ghosts of its colonial past.

Griffiths' reconsideration of *Cloudstreet* proceeds not only from its establishment as a 'modern Australian classic,' as Penguin has marketed recent editions of the novel, but also from the deeper question of whether Winton's treatment of Australia's colonial past is entirely satisfactory. *Cloudstreet* is notable, af-

ter all, for confronting this past in a way that was unusual for its time, given the book's proximity to the swell of nationalism surrounding the 1988 bicentennial celebration and the fact that its publication preceded the High Court's landmark Mabo native title decision. Winton evokes not only the history that produced the house's ghosts, but also creates the character of the 'blackfella,' using this figure as a liminal prophet, corporeal but seeming to possess an occasional otherworldliness, to remind the inhabitants of Cloudstreet about the importance of that place to the two families. As Griffiths notes, however, this 'more corporeal spectrality of "the blackfella" could be read as either a redemption of white-settler colonisation or a challenge to it' (86). While Griffiths recognises that '*Cloudstreet* refuses at first to succumb to the trap of rendering indigeneity as simply passed: a spectral presence haunting (but never quite thwarting) settler-colonial sovereignty,' he observes that the novel nonetheless remains deeply problematic with regard to this issue for the implicit way it uses the apparent naiveté of the colonizer as a sort of historical excuse (88).

The purpose of this essay is not to return to this territory with regard to *Cloudstreet*, a topic well-covered by Griffiths, Crouch, Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman, among others, but to consider instead how these ideas might be reframed in the context of Winton's more recent ideas about ethics. *Cloudstreet*, while undoubtedly his most famous and popular publication, falls firmly within what might be called the 'middle period' of Winton's work, alongside *In the Winter Dark* (1988), *The Riders* (1994), and *Dirt Music* (2001). With the publication of *The Turning* (2004), critics have noted a new maturity in Winton's work, a greater sense of depth and subtlety that, fittingly, reflects a 'turn' in his writing. Nicholas Birns, for example, notes that Winton's work since *The Turning*

> has been more opaque and challenging. Before *The Turning*, although Winton's writing shared a sense of the offbeat and the idiosyncratic with Faulkner, it lacked both Faulkner's formal experimentation and its immersion in tragic conflict, particularly as race, although present in *Cloudstreet*, did not play nearly as prominent a role in Winton's work as it does in Faulkner's. From *The Turning* onward, Winton filled every page with nuance and implication; his books are medium-sized but seem longer because of their moral and intellectual complexity. (79)

Birns's summary of this shift in Winton's writing again notes the ambiguity of Winton's treatment of race in *Cloudstreet*, the lingering feeling that while his willingness to address this matter is laudable, it nonetheless remains problematic. If *The Turning* marks a new phase in Winton's writing, then surely it

is worth investigating whether this deepening of perspective also brings with it a fresh consideration of these colonial and racial themes in his work. In what follows I focus on 'Aquifer,' the third story in *The Turning*, another tale of haunting that revisits and re-evaluates many of the ideas raised in his earlier work.

The body of critical literature about *The Turning* is surprisingly thin, with most critics casting 'Aquifer' only a sidelong glance. Bridget Grogan, for example, focuses mainly on the recurring characters and plotlines that criss-cross Winton's book, so that 'Aquifer,' which stands tangentially to these overlapping sequences, is not given any detailed attention in her analysis. Other critics, however, have tended to accord the story more importance – Bill Ashcroft, for instance, singles out 'Aquifer' a number of times in his meditation on the symbolism of water in Winton's fiction. By far the most substantial critical discussion of 'Aquifer' occurs in an essay by Nathanael O'Reilly, who contends that 'Aquifer' is a 'postcolonial story dealing with complex intertwined issues of European settlement and immigration, Indigenous displacement, land rights and ownership, race, nationality and non-Indigenous belonging' ('Environmental Degradation' 54). Arguing that the often overlooked and denigrated setting of suburbia is, in reality, a key zone of contestation for these issues in Australian culture, O'Reilly provides a detailed analysis of how Winton's story proves this point: the way in which Winton locates the suburb as an important battleground between the city and the bush; the fraught relationship between the narrator and his English nemesis, Alan Mannering, which reflects the problematic ongoing legacy of Australia's colonial heritage; the symbolic importance of the Joneses, an Indigenous family whose presence in the story provides the narrator with the only point of continuity between his present and past lives. O'Reilly, however, justifiably limits his interpretation of the story to the parameters of his central thesis about Australian literature and its relation to suburbia.

My own approach seeks to locate Winton's story within a broader set of ethical questions faced by the story's narrator. His reflections are prompted by the grisly discovery of '[f]our femurs and a skull' in the swamp behind his old neighbourhood (Winton, *Turning* 37). The reason for his compulsion to return so suddenly and urgently to the scene of his past life, driving five hours without notifying his wife or employer, remains opaque until he reveals a guilty secret that has haunted him ever since he was ten years old: he once witnessed another boy, the aforementioned Alan Mannering, drown in the swamp. The narrator's feelings are framed by his unusual relationship with Alan who, in the words of the narrator, 'waited for me after school some days to walk behind me and persecute me wordlessly the whole way home' (41). This 'persecution' consisted

in the narrator being 'poked and prodded and shoved' – annoying behaviour, but mild enough for the narrator to admit that 'though I dreaded him I don't think I ever hated him' (41). One day, the narrator wakes from a nap to find Alan urinating in a circle around him, an apparent 'act of territorialism and supremacy,' as O'Reilly interprets it ('Environmental Degradation' 52). The narrator swears at Alan – 'You're shit, I said, surprising myself' – at which point Alan launches himself onto the water in a makeshift boat crafted from the roof of an old car (Winton, *Turning* 46). The narrator watches Alan from the shore:

> When he went down, sliding sideways like a banking aircraft out there in the ruffled shimmer of the swamp's eye, I really didn't think that my smug feeling, my satisfied pity about his English teeth, had caused the capsize. He didn't come up. I never even hated him, though I'd never called anyone shit before. After the water settled back and shook itself smooth again like hung washing, there wasn't a movement. No sign.
>
> I went home and said nothing. (46)

Although Alan's death does not occur through any direct action by the narrator, he nonetheless feels guilt and responsibility for what happened. Clearly there are submerged feelings (as hinted in the story's titular metaphor) on both sides of this relationship. Alan's actions, for instance, are loaded with ambiguity: his constant needling of the narrator suggests a deeper attraction that he is incapable of expressing, and his territorial urination might be interpreted equally as an act of tenderness and repressed passion as one of domination. Alan never speaks directly to the narrator, but nonetheless draws him into an unspoken contract that is sealed by death. As such, the narrator interprets Alan's quasi-suicide as an act of judgment for which he is responsible. The extent of this psychological debt is measured by the burden of secrecy the narrator carries with him – a feeling that intensifies when he witnesses the Mannering family grieving for their lost son – and remains so powerful that it continues to haunt him decades later, as revealed by his compulsion to return to the original scene.

The narrator's feeling that his guilt represents a kind of ethical debt to the universe reflects a recurring pattern in Winton's fiction. In *Cloudstreet*, for instance, Sam Pickles lives under 'the shifty shadow of God,' a principle of good and bad luck that turns his life (and his earnings) into a series of gains and losses, windfalls and debts (10). On the Lamb side of the Cloudstreet

house, a cosmological debt is incurred when Fish Lamb narrowly survives a fishing accident, leaving him alive but severely brain-damaged. The family pays a collective price for Fish's survival by losing their religious faith, although none of the Lambs feels this debt so deeply as Quick, who punishes himself by putting images and stories of the world's misery on his bedroom walls as a sort of penance. 'You and me understand about Fish,' says Quick's father, Lester Lamb. 'We were there. We were stupid enough to drown him tryin to save him. You remember that. We owe him things, Quick. We got a debt' (94).

The purchase of the house in Ireland by Fred Scully in *The Riders*, similarly, comes about from Scully 'acknowledging his debts, squaring things away' while visiting his friend Mylie, who had once helped him get on his feet while living in London (*Riders* 13). But the novel takes a dark turn when, having decided to move permanently from Australia to Ireland, Scully's wife Jennifer deserts him and their daughter, Billie, without any explanation as to why she has left him or where she has gone. Scully wanders across Europe in search of his lost wife, his mind full of confusion and unspecified guilt, culminating in the titular vision of the mythical riders of the Great Hunt, bearers of a symbolic revenge. In *Dirt Music*, Luther Fox feels a profound existential pain from being the sole survivor of a car accident that killed his closest friends and family. Even though the accident is not Luther's fault, he nonetheless repeatedly suffers from 'pangs of guilt' and an 'unfocused sense of betrayal. But betrayal of whom?' (*Dirt* 69). The small-town world of White Point is a network of social and economic obligations, so Luther retreats into the remote outback in search of a way to clear his debts and gain redemption. The psychology of guilt as debt that pervades 'Aquifer' is, as these examples demonstrate, a recurrent theme in Winton's fiction. It is this psychology, too, that surely drives the motif of haunting explored in the introduction to this paper, a sense that Australia owes a debt, in particular, to its Indigenous inhabitants for the appropriation of their land.

Staying true to Winton's longstanding habit of using religious ideas in his fiction, this theme of debt (or sin) is accompanied by its theological resolution in the form of grace. As such, the regenerative workings of nature in 'Aquifer' function as a kind of resurrection, from the odour of the 'blood and bone' (*Turning* 42) fertilizer lingering in the air when the narrator first discovers the existence of the underground water table, to his subsequent contemplation of the cycle of death and regeneration that the land around him perpetuates:

> [P]eople in our neighbourhood began to sink bores to get water. . . . I thought of Alan Mannering raining silently down upon the lawns on our street. I thought of him in lettuce and tomatoes, on our roses.

> Like blood and bone. . . . I thought . . . of tadpoles toiling through the muddy depths of Alan Mannering. . . . My neighbour had gotten into everything; he was artesian. . . . I imagined a hundred years, then a thousand and a million. I surveyed the zeroes of a million. Birds, fish, animals, plants were drowned in our swamp. On every zero I drew a squiggly tadpole tail and shuddered. All those creatures living and dying, born to be reclaimed, all sinking back into the earth to rise again and again: evaporated, precipitated, percolated. Every time a mosquito bit I thought involuntarily of some queasy transaction with fair, silent, awful Alan Mannering. If I'm honest about it, I think I still do even now. (49)

In this key passage the reader witnesses a double movement: the narrator's identification of the 'queasy transaction' he incurred with Alan's death, and the dispersal of this debt into the larger collective. In the narrator's imagination, Alan is absorbed into the land and becomes a part of everything – the air he breathes, the food he eats, the ground on which he walks. Yet this dispersal, while initially suffocating for the ubiquity with which it haunts the narrator, also relieves him of his particular guilt, for he gradually comes to understand that Alan's body is just a tiny speck in a great 'soup' (50) of death and decay that stretches back thousands and millions of years. The narrator realises that his own story is a microcosm of a much larger natural cycle of life and death that, by transcending his individuality, also removes the weight of moral responsibility for Alan's death that continues to haunt him.

In its treatment of this theme of natural renewal, Winton's story bears a striking resemblance to Walt Whitman's poem 'This Compost,' the earliest version of which appeared in the 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass* under the title 'Poem of Wonder at the Resurrection of the Wheat.' Whitman's poem is organized according to an evolving sequence of feelings in the mind of the poet: an initial disgust at the 'foul liquid and meat' that have soaked into the ground across generations of death and decay; a rapid reversal of this position when he realises that nature 'is no cheat' and 'all is clean forever and forever' thanks to its redemptive practices; and concluding with a final meditation on the contrast between the 'divine materials' that nature bestows on humanity and the disgusting 'leavings' it accepts 'from them at last' (Whitman 390-2). Although Winton echoes many of these same redemptive sentiments in 'Aquifer,' he also introduces some qualifications that stand in important contrast to Whitman's ideas. At the heart of this difference lie the two writers' contrasting relationships to the 'New World,' a term formerly used to describe the various European colonial acquisitions. Whitman welcomes the perceived opportunity that the

'New World' presents to the colonial imagination, most famously celebrating it in the 'Children of Adam' poems of *Leaves of Grass* by comparing the United States to a new Eden, fervently hoping that his country will prove to be a fresh paradise free from the evils and vices that plagued Europe for so many centuries. As Maria Farland notes, Whitman's poem complicates and deepens the positive, all-embracing philosophy that echoes through much of *Leaves of Grass*. There is redemption in the poem, it is true, but the cycle of regeneration it describes is bought at the cost of death and struggle. While Winton's story explores a theme congruous to Whitman's poem, there is both a more profound and urgent awareness in the former's text of the true price paid for the 'New World,' and a deeper suspicion that this newness is itself a trick, the product of a counterfeit logic.

This suspicion is exemplified by the narrator's recollection of how the suburban land on which he grew up was marketed as 'new,' a place without a past and its attendant ghosts. 'Our homes were new; no one had ever lived in them before. They were as fresh as we imagined the country itself to be' (Winton, *Turning* 38). Notice Winton's careful use of language in this passage – the country is merely 'imagined' as new, the implication being that such an assertion is flawed in its logic. This ironic characterization extends, in particular, to the narrator's recollection of the Indigenous Jones family, whose identity is appropriated not only by their generically British (more specifically, Welsh) name, but also by their forced integration into the European order of class labels. 'Everyone was working class, even the Aborigines around the corner whose name was Jones, though it seemed that these were Joneses who didn't need much keeping up with. We were new. It was all new' (39). This apparent newness, the narrator quickly comes to realise, is a poorly disguised trick, much like the 'naturalness' of the suburban houses, which are organized in such a way as to hide their bureaucratic design: 'Houses were of three basic designs and randomly jumbled along the way to lend an air of natural progression rather than reveal the entire suburb's origins in the smoky, fly-buzzing office of some bored government architect' (38). The surface of the narrator's world is repeatedly inflected by these surface judgments ('new,' 'natural'), but the aquifer metaphor at the heart of this story compels the narrator to look beneath this façade to see through the false labels imposed onto his surroundings.

We see this same falsification at play in the narrator's meditation on the logic of time. As a young boy, the narrator discovers that, without charge, he can use the public telephone to call up a service that announces the exact time:

> I supposed I was five or six when I learned to go in and stand on tiptoe to reach up and dial 1194 to hear a man with a BBC voice announce

> the exact time. I did that for years, alone and in company, listening to the authority in the man's voice. He sounded like he knew what he was on about, that at the stroke it would indeed be the time he said it was. It was a delicious thing to know, that at any moment of the day, when adults weren't about, you could dial yourself something worth knowing, something irrefutable, and not need to pay. (40)

To the youthful narrator, this judgment is initially acceptable because of the signifiers of authority it bears, most notably the class and cultural echoes of British colonialism that are conveyed by the announcer's 'BBC voice.' But when the narrator grows older and starts to explore the wild spaces of the swamp, he begins to look beyond this façade:

> By this time I was beginning to have second thoughts about the 1194 man. My parents bought a kitchen clock which seemed to cheat with time. A minute was longer some days than others. An hour beyond the fence travelled differently across your skin compared with an hour of television. I felt time turn off. Time wasn't straight and neither was the man with the BBC voice. (43)

Winton repeats this same pattern throughout 'Aquifer,' showing the reader a world that is replete with specious claims, where what is presented as new, natural, fertile, and nurturing turns out, when examined more closely, to be exactly the opposite. Winton stands the falseness of human culture in contrast to the world of nature, which occupies an authentic space consumed by the cyclical combat of its own existence.

Natural conflict is not the same thing as human war, for nature's struggle is never truly adversarial. There is nothing moral, nothing personal – in short, no judgment – in these processes to transform them into a state of war, only a struggle to grow and flourish. 'Combat is not war,' writes Gilles Deleuze in *Essays Critical and Clinical* (1993). 'War is only a combat-against, a will to destruction, a judgment of God that turns destruction into something "just." . . . Combat, by contrast, is a powerful, nonorganic vitality that supplements force with force, and enriches whatever it takes a hold of' (133). Winton characterizes this natural struggle throughout the story as something hidden below the surface, symbolically drawing a comparison between the subterranean reserves of the Australian landscape and the submerged emotions of the narrator:

> The brown land, I figured, wasn't just wide but deep too. All that dust on the surface . . . And beneath the crust, rising and falling

> with the tide, the soup, the juice of things filters down strong and pure and mobile as time itself finding its own level. . . . [I]t was strangely comforting. All the dead alive in the land, all the lost who bank up, mounting in layers of silt and humus, all the creatures and plants making thermoclynes in seas and rivers and estuaries. I wasn't responsible for *their* coming and going either but I felt them in the lake and on the breeze. I have, boy and man, felt the dead in my very water. (Winton, *Turning* 50)

Alongside this natural cycle of life and death, in 'Aquifer' Winton provides glimpses of a human world torn apart by the horrors of war and genocide. This other kind of violence is also cyclical: the conflict between the narrator and the English boy Alan Mannering can be read as a re-enactment of Australia's colonization, just as the eviction of the Jones family at the end of the story parallels the dispossession of its Indigenous inhabitants. These injustices are not limited by the story's Australian context, but seem instead to be ingrained in the human condition: the narrator briefly alludes to the arrival of 'some Cape Coloureds' (44), for instance, comparing their skin colour to the Joneses in a way that replicates the racist assumptions of the Apartheid regime in South Africa; one of the narrator's childhood friends, Bruno the Yugo, later 'went back to Serbia to burn Albanians out of their homes' (50) in the genocidal Balkan wars of the 1990s; and at the end of the story, Winton alludes to Moses, comparing the advance of the suburbs to a 'promised land' that, just as in the biblical story, was paid for by the genocide of the original inhabitants. Winton seems compelled, more strongly and directly than in his previous work, to confront the oppression of the Indigenous peoples, as well as the horrors of war and imperialism that formed and shaped (and now haunt) the country to which he belongs.

The feeling of being haunted, by its very nature, forces us to reconsider the past, to think once again about the ghosts of previous wrongs and injustices. Like Winton's most recent novels, which continue to explore characters who are deeply troubled by the circular, traumatically repetitive histories that have shaped (and in some ways, ruined) them – Bruce Pike in *Breath* (2009), Tom Keely in *Eyrie* (2013) – 'Aquifer' is characterized not so much by a clear-cut past and present as a sense of circular time. The narrator's return to the scene of his childhood trauma, the symbolic reconstruction (in microcosmic form) of Australia's colonial past, the endless cycle of violence and war, the eternal revolution of life and death in nature, all speak to a turning (and returning) that echoes the title of Winton's collection. Winton seeks to discover an ethical position while acknowledging the reality that war, injustice, prejudice – indeed,

all the things that have produced the ghosts of the past – are an inextricable part of human existence. They may return in different forms, but they are always in the process of returning for, as the narrator observes at the conclusion of the story, 'the past is in us, and not behind us. Things are never over' (53).

Winton's ethical position is grounded most obviously in his religious ideas, which consist of an unorthodox mixture of Christianity and ecological spirituality. While Winton has spoken extensively about his beliefs in numerous articles and interviews, one of his most powerful statements appears in a 2015 Palm Sunday editorial published in *The Sydney Morning Herald*. The focus of Winton's text is a plea for Australia to rethink its treatment of refugees, a controversial political topic in Australia in recent years, with Winton urging his readers not to let the detention of these vulnerable people become yet another blot on Australia's history:

> In this country, a nation built upon people fleeing brutes and brutality for 200 years, we have a tradition of fairness and decency and openness of which we're rightly proud. Whether we're inspired by the Christian parable of the Good Samaritan, the universal dignity of humankind, or the sanctity of the individual, we've always thought it low and cowardly to avert our gaze from someone in trouble or need, to turn our face from them as though they did not exist. When I was a kid, there were a few salty names for people like that. You didn't want to be called out as one of those. That's where our tradition of mateship comes from. Not from closing ranks against the outsider, but from lifting someone else up, helping them out, resisting the cowardly urge to walk by. It distinguished this country from the feudalism and patronage of the Old World. (Winton, 'Palm')

While Winton frames his argument according to the broader ethical ideals of Australian culture, particularly a 'tradition of mateship' (which appears, in this context, to extend beyond its traditionally masculine boundaries), the central logic and symbolism of this piece is drawn from the Christian parable of the Good Samaritan. It is the Australian way, he argues, to take care of one's neighbour, to look after them when they are in distress rather than callously and selfishly walking on by.

Related in the Bible in Luke 10:25–37, this parable focuses on the concept of caring for others ('thy neighbour'), making it an important text for understanding the underlying ethics of Winton's work. Its symbolism is embedded in the structure of *Cloudstreet*, for example, with its two main families and their heterogeneous value systems brought under one roof, living together as neighbours

who must learn to care for each other despite their differences. '*Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself*,' quotes Lester Lamb at one point, reciting from the Sermon on the Mount (*Cloudstreet* 395, original italics). In Winton's earlier novel *In the Winter Dark*, the central character of Murray Jaccob reiterates the tacit ethical tie that exists between neighbours: 'Like you say, we're in this together. . . . Neighbours and everything' (98). Near the end of *Breath*, Bruce Pike has a heated argument about the morality of lusting after 'his neighbour's wife' (209), a reference to both the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:7) and Jesus' reinterpretation of the commandment against adultery (Matthew 5:27–8). Pike's vehemence is fuelled, the reader understands, by his youthful affair with Eva, the wife of Sando, his surfing mentor and former neighbour. In 'Aquifer,' Alan Mannering is referred to by the narrator as 'my neighbour' (*Turning* 49), whereas the Jones family, revealingly, are merely 'the Aborigines around the corner' (39). Clearly the neighbour is a key recurring concept in Winton's work, a figure that, overlapping Christian ideas with Australian cultural ideas about 'mateship,' signifies the ethical bond between human beings.

The parable itself is prefaced by an exchange between Jesus and an unnamed lawyer, who summarizes the spirit of the law with a version of the Golden Rule, to 'love the Lord thy God with all thy heart . . . and thy neighbour as thyself.' 'And who is my neighbour?' the lawyer then asks, leading Jesus to narrate his parable about the Good Samaritan. The parable answers the lawyer's question in an unexpected way, for it turns out that the Samaritan, due to regional and cultural rivalries, would normally be the hated enemy of the story's protagonist. With this story, Jesus advocates for a new universalism, in which goodness is redefined not as a rigid adherence to the law, but instead as the ability to express empathy and kindness beyond the usual boundaries of culture that normally separate human beings. Despite its antiquity, the parable continues to have a significant impact on contemporary ethics, albeit mostly in the form of a critique. In *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), for example, Immanuel Kant juxtaposes his notion of the categorical imperative, which attempts to develop an ethics grounded in rationality (rather than love), to the biblical principle of loving one's neighbour, while Friedrich Nietzsche, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–5), unravels the contradictions of being exhorted to love one's neighbour as oneself by a religion that simultaneously discourages self-love. In more recent theory, the idea of the neighbour has been revisited, most notably, by Slavoj Žižek in works like *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology* (2005) and *Refugees, Terror and Other Troubles with the Neighbors* (2016). Žižek's recent concerns with the figure of the neighbour, like Winton's, are prompted by the refugee crisis, yet Žižek approaches the problem from a very different perspective. Both works on the neighbour by Žižek – the first a theoretical

refutation of Emmanuel Levinas, the second a more general meditation on the global political situation – are an attempt to articulate an ethics of compassion while, once again, engaging in a thorough critique of the underlying principle of the original parable. Žižek's stance should come as no surprise: his most important intellectual inspiration is, after all, Jacques Lacan, who in his 1959–60 seminar *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, engages in a thorough critique of the notion of the neighbour by arguing that the aggressive narcissism of humanity makes the idea of loving one's neighbour a horrifying proposition. In contrast to this overwhelming modern tendency to criticize the paradoxes and limits of the Good Samaritan parable, Winton seems to take its central message, with a few cultural modifications, wholeheartedly on board.

The repetitive, cyclical structure of the Good Samaritan parable is also of interest to our reading of 'Aquifer.' After the story's protagonist is robbed and beaten, Jesus presents his listeners with a circular narrative in which he first describes a priest, who ignores the plight of the dying man despite his religious obligations, then a Levite, who does the same, and finally the Samaritan who, despite being the enemy of the Jews, puts into practice the commandment to 'love thy neighbour as thyself' that was first given in Leviticus 19:18. When we read 'Aquifer' in this light, it seems that Winton's story, in addition to its other elements, can also be viewed as a loose retelling of this Christian parable. The death of 'my neighbour' Alan Mannering parallels the actions of the priest who passes by the suffering man, an ethical failure that haunts the narrator for years to come. Whereas the parable ends in redemption, Winton's narrator fails once again in his neighbourly duty by witnessing the eviction of the Jones family, only to drive on selfishly without stopping to help. Interpreted in this way, 'Aquifer' can be read as an indictment of Australia's moral failings, epitomized by its selective refusal to extend the ethics of neighbourliness to Indigenous people, to refugees – in short, to the very people that Christ exhorts his listeners to care for in his parable. These failings, Winton points out in his Palm Sunday piece, are what generate the ghosts of injustice that continue to haunt us: 'A settlement built on suffering will never be settled. An economy built on cruelty is a swindle. A sense of comfort built upon the crushed spirits of children is but a delusion that feeds ghosts and unleashes fresh terrors' ('Palm'). Through the ethics of the neighbour Winton offers his readers, religious or otherwise, an opportunity to make a different choice in favour of empathy and compassion so that, in the words of T.S. Eliot's 'Ash Wednesday,' the inspiration for the title of Winton's collection, 'what is done, not be done again.'

In these respects 'Aquifer' prefigures the defining themes of Winton's later work. Various elements from this story, for instance, are reused in his most recent novel, *Eyrie*. The suppression of neighbourliness is symbolized by Tom

Keely's apartment building, in which 'neighbours' have been reduced to 'strangers . . . alien to him in the most satisfying way imaginable, anonymous and reassuringly disconnected' (Winton, *Eyrie* 4). Keely is drawn back into a neighbourly relationship by his connection with Gemma Buck, who grew up in the same neighbourhood as him and, along with her grandson Kai, now occupies an apartment on the same floor of his building. As in 'Aquifer,' Keely and Gemma find themselves returning compulsively to the place where they grew up, the significantly named Blackboy Crescent, which was also built on the edge of a swamp where, as a child, Keely and his sister once made a 'canoe' from 'the roof off an old car' (91–92). The aquifer metaphor reappears in *Eyrie* as well, with Winton describing Perth as a city 'on life support – desalinated seawater and ancient shrinking aquifers,' the latter symbolizing the destructive, short-term greed that accompanies the profit-driven, unneighbourly mindset (82–3).

Winton's recent forays into non-fiction draw a more explicit connection between this underlying ethic of neighbourliness and the Indigenous custodianship of the land, positive ideas that are contrasted with the evils of colonialism, commercialism, and environmental degradation. Winton pays homage to the 'neighbourly' ethics of Indigenous culture in essays from *Island Home* (2015) such as 'Dodnun, 2006,' which describes his friendship with Chapman, a Ngarinjin lawman, and 'Paying Respect,' which praises 'Aboriginal wisdom' for its 'ancient and hardwon knowledge at once philosophically sophisticated and practical' (*Island* 188). Perhaps the most revealing piece, however, is 'Repatriation' from Winton's latest book *The Boy Behind the Curtain* (2016), which brings together all the aforementioned themes: first, it recounts the devastation of the Western Australian landscape caused by the clearing of land to farm a naturally hostile terrain (an unsustainable practice made possible only by short-term, artificial means like aquifers); second, it meditates on the negative impact of colonization on Indigenous culture; finally, it relates the various attempts to revive a neighbourly spirit through environmental revitalization and cultural respect. 'Aquifer' represents a prelude to these emergent themes in Winton's later writing, a turn in his work as he seeks to address more adequately the unresolved ghosts of Australia's past that, earlier in his career, once made themselves felt in the house on Cloudstreet.

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